

PLANNING AND FACILITATING TRAINING PROGRAMS WITH MULTICULTURAL GROUPS

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Abstract

Demographic changes in the work environments present numerous challenges for training professionals interested in fostering awareness and sensitivity to cultural diversity when planning and facilitating adult education programs. As a professional trainer who works with multicultural groups in urban settings, I am exploring ways in which race, ethnicity, gender and age influence planning and facilitating training programs. In this paper I am addressing the social construction of race, ethnicity, gender and age and how training professionals might deal with the influence of these concepts in curriculum planning and facilitating training programs.

Introduction

Developments in technology, global economics, and the continued restructuring of American corporations are workplace issues that must be recognized and addressed by managers and employees if organizations are to prosper and remain competitive. To prosper, American organizations must also value, understand and better utilize the increasing cultural diversity of the American workforce (Loden & Rosener, 1999).

As educators, training professionals also need to increase their awareness of and sensitivity to cultural diversity when planning and facilitating adult education programs. Yet increasing awareness and sensitivity is not just about understanding tools and techniques for program planning and synthesizing diversity initiatives in organizations. Nor is it just about being knowledgeable about the customs and values of people of different nationalities, although that is important. Rather, the key is to understand and recognize how race, ethnicity, gender, and age influence what the training professional does when planning and facilitating the adult education programs. The purpose of this paper is to look more closely at the concepts of race, ethnicity, gender and age and the connection to planning and facilitating adult education programs. I first begin by providing some discussion about the social construction of race, ethnicity, gender and age and then examine what training professionals can do when planning and facilitating adult education programs with multicultural groups.

Race

Larry Naylor (1997), in his discussion on the concept of race and racial classification, wrote, "It doesn't take a Ph.D. to know that people living in Nairobi look different from inhabitants of Tokyo, and that both look different from residents living in Dublin and Calcutta" (p. 55). If we assume people in Nairobi will continue to look different from people in Tokyo, as Naylor suggests, the concept of race will not disappear from the world any time soon. But we do often use the term "race" when we consider differences in diversity orientations. Naylor suggests people ought to consider race as simultaneously the differences in physical characteristics and a socially constructed concept that classifies people into groups. Race is perceived as not only physical but as a group classification. For instance, Asians and African Americans have distinct physical characteristics and in a training program, Asians as a group might be perceived as reserved and less talkative and African Americans as a group might be perceived as more talkative and expressive.

A striking observation about the growing scope of race is Gardenswartz and Rowe's (1998) position that we do not live in a color-blind society. Race is the first thing we notice about another person, and it plays into our perceptions and interactions.

"Generally associated with physical characteristics such as skin color, eye shape, and hair texture, race forms a powerful diversity dimension because it is so visible" (p. 29).

Meacham, Campo-Flores, Smith, Breslau, Samuels, and Clemetson (2000), redraw the color line and redefine race as not just a matter of black and white. Race is nuances of brown and yellow and red and even though racial categories appear biological, they are often social. Despite racial categories in the United States appearing mutually exclusive, they may be overlapping.

Ethnicity and Racioethnicity

Like race, ethnicity is socially constructed. Gardenswartz and Rowe (1998) define ethnicity as an individual's nationality or ethnic background. "Ethnic differences can bring variations in cultural norms, holiday observances, language proficiency, and group affiliations"(p. 30).

Ericksen (1993) purports ethnicity has a strong influence on community status relations, ethnic character, background, and affiliation. We see this in words like "ethnic group" "ethnicity," and "ethnic conflict" that are common in the English language, and are cropping up in the press, in television news, in political programs, and in casual conversations.

Kossek and Zonia (1993) use the term "racioethnicity" (biologically and/or culturally distinct groups) to refer to group characteristics, organizational characteristics, and perceptions of diversity climate. Cox (as cited in Chemers, Oskamp, & Costanzo, 1995, p. 66) also uses racioethnicity to label differences in physical and cultural backgrounds among group members with the same national origin (e.g. African Americans in the United States). The term is preferred to ethnicity because ethnicity is used to distinguish people within a race group such as Irish versus German ancestry.

Gender

O'Sullivan, Hartley, Saunders, Montgomery, and Fiske (1994) consider gender in a way that reflects its societal construction. Gender is "all culture and no nature: the only natural aspect of gender is *sexual* differentiation – a bio/physiological difference upon which is balanced a rickety but enormously elaborate cultural structure of differences, which are used to classify and make meaningful the social relations of the human species" (p. 127). The point of this distinction is nothing very much can be done about human physiology in the short run, but culture can be transformed. So arguments about what is "essentially male or female," or "masculine" or "feminine", often justify gender differences as being "only natural," but this justification is "only ideological," according to these authors.

From an adult learning perspective, Flannery and Hayes (2000) consider gender as a type of social relation constantly changing, created and recreated in daily interactions through such institutions as school, work and the family and as a result, women and men are products of social and cultural beliefs. The message preached to little girls is "sugar and spice and everything nice" (Gardenswartz & Rowe, 1998, p.27). Further, women's learning takes place in a wide variety of settings and adult educators need to recognize that there are multiple realities of women's learning across race, ethnicity, gender and age. One woman's learning experiences may not be identical to those of any other women. In the workplace for instance, while more women are entering the workforce than ever before Jamieson and O'Mara (1991) report the types of job training available to women is affected by gender and the types of behavior that make men successful may not work for women. A woman who uses the same direct method of confrontation as the male manager may be perceived as overly aggressive. And women are still asked more often than men to take notes at meetings or to organize refreshments.

Likewise, it is important to include some of what David Gilmore (1990) writes about the cultural concept of masculinity and manhood and how people in different cultures conceive and experience manhood. Specifically, he found that men everywhere were preoccupied with the concept of being a “real man” or “true man” and that many societies build up an image of manhood through cultural ritual, sanctions, or trials of skill and endurance. In contemporary American society, he suggests there is an official manliness. For instance, a real man provides for his family and is courageous, strong, tough, and brave. The “real man” ideology suggests big boys don’t cry and a real man doesn’t spend too much time at home! This socialization sets up fundamentally different expectations for men and assigns appropriate and in appropriate roles and behaviors to each sex. In the workplace for instance, men use communication as a means of establishing a hierarchy of order and power whereas women interact to form relationships and share feelings and reactions Gardenswartz and Rowe (1998). Consequently, men may be seen as cold and insensitive and women may be seen as wasting time.

Age

Another important factor to consider in planning and facilitating training programs is participant’s age. Age in this discussion refers to the era (Matures, Baby Boomers, Generation X) in which an individual is reared in terms of values, norms, and expectations.

Matures, those born between 1909 and 1945 came of age under the shadows of the Great Depression, World War II, Korea and the Cold War. According to Smith and Clurman (1997) their attitudes toward life and work were formed during economic upheaval, common enemies, and America’s role as an emerging superpower. They had a more constrained set of expectations and core values (discipline, hard work, obedience to authority, etc.) were what we think of as traditional values. When these folks turned a certain age it was assumed they would behave in the same way as those who turned that age before them.

The Baby Boomers (the Me Generation) were born between 1946 and 1964. Significant markers for this generation were the Great Society, general economic prosperity, expansion of suburbs, Nixon, color TV, and sex, drugs and rock n’ roll. They enjoyed unprecedented employment and educational opportunities (the GI Bill) and have an ingrained sense of entitlement.

For Generation X, the Why Me? generation born after 1964 markers include divorce, AIDS, Sesame Street, MTV, crack cocaine, Game Boy and the PC. This is a generation characterized as participatory and Xers see themselves as part of the new information age driven by media and technologies. They want the media to help them and only want to get information that interests them, and from just a few sources (Smith & Clurman, 1997).

Dealing with Race, Ethnicity, Gender and Age in Planning and Facilitating

The intersection of race, ethnicity, gender and age are powerful dynamics that will determine whose ideas are valued, who can speak and who cannot in a training session. The construction of these concepts in this manner can result in misread signals and mistaken interpretations that lead to frustration and misunderstanding for trainers, participants and among participants at a training program

Tisdale (1995) suggests adult educators create inclusive educational environments that consider the sponsoring agency, the agenda, and learning activities. This means paying attention to diversity, the nature of the learning activity, who the participants in those activities are and what their respective places are in relationship to the institutional sponsoring agency and to society at large. The educator learns and is sensitive to the customs, concepts, beliefs, norms, and attitudes and so on of the other cultures they are working with.

According to Chemers, Oskamp and Costanzo (1995), “there are two ways to deal with diversity...the melting pot conception which argues that the best country has a single homogeneous culture...or there is the multiculturalism conception, which assumes that each

cultural group should preserve as much of its original culture as is feasible, without interfering with the smooth functioning of the society" (p. 14). They advocate the latter and urge adult educators to develop a good understanding of the culture of the people they are working with and facilitate participants learning and sensitivity to the customs, concepts, beliefs, norms, and attitudes of the other participant's cultures they are working with in a training program.

In 1997 Taylor Cox presented *Competency to Manage Diversity* at the Pacific Region Forum on Business and Management Communication. His paper was presented as a step-by-step guide for business plans. These suggestions can be used as guidelines to understand and effectively respond to demographic trends and the presence of cultural diversity when planning and facilitating training programs and dealing with the complex issues surrounding the interrelationships of race, ethnicity, gender and age. Cox offers three phases: awareness, understanding, and action to change behavior, as a way to effectively respond at the individual and organizational level. For trainers, the first phase of awareness means recognizing that race, ethnicity, gender and age do affect behavior and outcomes. Secondly, when a trainer develops insight about these concepts and understands how and why knowing about diversity is good for adult education, the trainer can make changes to the training program to reflect this insight. This leads to the third phase, taking action to change behavior. A trainer might change curriculum to include activities that deal with race, ethnicity, gender and age and inter group communications for instance.

In *Serving Culturally Diverse Populations* Ross-Gordon, Martin and Briscoe (1990) add to the Cox model networking, collaborating, and getting in touch with others who have experienced success working with diverse populations. Couple this with finding other professional approaches and institutions that specialize in multicultural education and we have tangible steps to improve planning and facilitating adult education programs with multicultural groups.

Conclusion

This discussion considered how race, ethnicity, gender and age are socially constructed and examined what training professionals can do when considering these concepts and planning and facilitating adult education programs. Ostensibly, training professionals have the responsibility to understand the characteristics of adult learners but they also have the responsibility to understand how the race, gender, ethnicity, and age of the adult learner might impede or enhance his or her learning. Recognizing the influence of race, gender, ethnicity, and age in adult education helps to clarify what training professionals need to do when facilitating programs with multicultural groups in the contemporary urban settings.

Likewise, it is important to recognize and acknowledge that trainers and participants bring a complex load of feelings, perceptions and experiences about race, ethnicity, gender and age to the learning program. These feelings, perceptions and experiences (that are often times unacknowledged) form a backdrop for work interactions, which in turn means confronting diversity on both an individual and societal level in the adult education learning program. Even with innovative planning and facilitating, we have more to learn about the precarious balance between the participant's needs and what they bring to the program. And we have more to learn about the training professional's experiences and the influence of race, ethnicity, gender and age when they planned and facilitated the training program with a multicultural group.

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